DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 775 EA 020 790

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TITLE Mentoring for Leadership Development.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Orlando, FL, March 11-14, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; Collegiality; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership; *Leadership Training; *Management Development; *Mentors; *Principals; Professional Development
IDENTIFIERS Bexley City Schools OH; *Danforth Foundation; *Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the use of mentoring as a central feature of the Danforth Foundation Program for the Preparation of School Principals at Ohio State University, and in particular, in Bexley (Ohio) City Schools. Most of the observations relate to the ways in which mentoring relationships were carried out during the 1987-88 academic year. Orientation activities, goals, participant expectations and reactions, and benefits of the program were discussed on the basis of two personalized perspectives on the use of mentoring. First, the operation of the mentoring concept in Bexley City Schools is described, including details of the general format for the work that brought administrative mentors and candidates together. Second, the personal reflections of one Danforth candidate are presented as a way to articulate some of the more meaningful aspects of the overall preparation program. Suggestions encompass specific ways mentors might help aspiring administrators. An overview of some of the most important benefits derived by candidates throughout the program conclude the study. These benefits include the development of confidence and competence, the acquisition of theory with practice, improved communication skills, learning "tricks of the trade," and the building of a collegial network. (JAM)

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MENTORING FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Orlando, Florida
March, 1989

EA 020 790

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MENTORING FOR LEADERSHIP

DEVELOPMENT

In the Fall of 1986, the Danforth Foundation of St. Louis announced an initiative to fund a number of new university-based programs to prepare school leaders. A basic assumption of the Foundation was that traditional efforts to train future principals and other administrators were not sensitive to the realities of much of society. As a result, new programs were needed to reflect the need for aspiring leaders to learn about their future craft through methods not traditionally included in conventional educational administration programs. As a result, the Danforth Foundation Program for the Preparation of Principals was born.

The first year of the program was the 1987-88 academic year. Three universities served as host sites during that initial phase: The University of Alabama; Georgia State University, and The Ohio State University. Each institution was encouraged to develop a principal preparation program that would be independent of efforts at the other sites. However, certain common elements were found. For example, each program was designed to incorporate as many experimental learning opportunities for aspiring leaders as possible. Second, a goal of the overall Danforth Program is to find strategies that may be used in opening the route to educational leadership to women and minority group members, and special efforts were made at each host institution to address this goal. Third, all programs have placed great emphasis on the need to find collaborative practices that would enable university faculties to work with local

school practitioners to identify and recruit talented people to assume leadership roles, and also to develop learning experiences that would be more effective in terms of helping individuals become successful school leaders.

One additional practice that has been common to all Danforth Principal Preparation Programs has been the utilization of practicing administrators to serve as career guides, or mentors, to aspiring administrators who have been serving as candidates in Danforth Programs across the nation. While this program element was never specifically mandated by the Foundation, it clearly became one of the most visible parts of the innovative leadership development programs. Universities and practitioner groups have realized that mentoring has considerable potential value for preservice preparation programs and also induction programs for new administrators. Further, there are likely many long-term implications for the use of mentoring arrangements for the continuing inservice education of practicing administrators.

In this paper, we examine the use of mentoring as a central feature of the Danforth Foundation Program for the Preparation of School Principals at one institution, The Ohio State University. Most of our observations are related to the ways in which mentoring relationships were carried out during the 1987-88 academic year. However, many of our observations are likely to have an impact on other dimensions of professional development for school leaders in the future. We begin by presenting a description of the ways in which the mentoring activities were carried out in one school system that participated in the Danforth Program. Next, we look at the

impact of mentoring on at least one candidate who was involved with the program. Both of these descriptions represent limited perspectives in one sense. However, we have found that what you will hear serves as a fairly consistent set of views regarding the potential value of mentoring for leadership development.

Mentoring in One School System

In the Spring of 1987, the Bexely (Ohio) City Schools were invited to participate in the Danforth Principals' Program. District administrators chose to accept this opportunity as a way to help members of the teaching staff with leadership ambitions achieve their goals. Initially, four classroom teachers in the district were selected as district-sponsored Danforth candidates. Four administrators (the superintendent and three building principals) volunteered to participate in the program as mentors. Planners of the program scheduled training and socializing opportunities for mentors and candidates throughout 1987-88.

In addition to participating in events planned by the University program facilitator, the Bexley mentors and candidates carried out a series of preparation activities within the district. To get this local effort underway, all participants met for breakfast early in September, 1987 to discuss program goals, a schedule, and themes to be covered throughout the year. It was agreed that all who were involved expected that two-way learning would occur over the course of the school year. That is, both mentors and candidates wanted to benefit from the scheduled program events. The specific goals for the Bexley program were:

1. To fulfill the general requirements of the Danforth Foundation Program at Ohio State.

2. To provide opportunity for training and practice in the major areas of job responsibilities of a building principal.

Monthly breakfast meetings for the purpose of ongoing evaluation, debriefing of learning, and planning of the Bexley Program continued throughout the year. District-planned events included:

1. A day to review Bexley budgeting procedures and finances. (Candidates met with their building principals to review budget processes at the building level. Next, they met with the district business manager to review the purchase order procedures. Finally, the candidates met with the superintendent and board treasurer to review the budgeting processes for the entire district and look at a budget document related to the total finances of the district. Between each level of meeting, debriefing learning sessions were held with the superintendent and treasurer).

2. A day to review budgeting and finances in other districts. (The superintendent arranged for each candidate to visit two districts to obtain a variety of perspectives in the areas of budgeting and finances. The group met to compose questions that would be asked in each out-of-district visit so that data could be composed upon return. Districts were selected to give candidates as broad a perspective of budgeting finance in Franklin County as possible).

3. A day to focus on the improvement of instruction. (Principals and candidates teamed up to observe classroom instruction and practice conferencing with teachers out-of-district).

4. Participation of candidates at a regularly scheduled meeting for district elementary principals. (The regular agenda for a meeting of elementary principals was pursued with candidates participating as colleagues. Candidates arranged with their respective building principals to attend a specific meeting of their choice).

5. A day to review district test results and learn how to use these results to improve program and instruction. (A consultant for the testing company worked with the mentors and candidates for a day to interpret data and discuss possible uses of text results).

6. Participation of candidates at a regularly scheduled Administrative Council meeting. (The regular agenda for an Administrative Council meeting was pursued with candidates participating as colleagues. Candidates arranged with their respective principals to attend a specific meeting).

7. A day to review special education procedures. (A consultant worked with candidates for a day to discuss special education services outside the district. The district coordinator for special education reviewed the work of building intervention teams and consultation teams as well as district special education procedures).

8. A day to discuss relationships with the Board of Education. (Mentor and candidate pairs met to discuss aspects of communications and relationships between building principals and the Board of Education).

9. Interview for a principalship. (Procedures used in the district for principal selection were reviewed and candidates were given the opportunity to practice a job interview.

In addition to these activities, candidates accepted the responsibility of serving as Self-Study Chairpersons for buildings involved with the district's North Central Association self-study. During the previous school year, all schools in the district had been accredited, and all buildings were involved with the self-study process during the 1987-88 school year, in anticipation of on-site evaluation visits during 1988-89.

Mentors and candidates continued to be encouraged to suggest additional topics for discussion and study throughout the year. All communications and relationships established between mentors and candidates were collegial in nature and informal. At the end of the year, all participants agreed that their initial expectations for two-way learning had in fact been achieved. All expressed their sense of satisfaction with the Danforth Program in general, and with the added learning experiences that were made available to participants from the Bexley City Schools.

Reactions of a Candidate

The Danforth Foundation Program for the Preparation of Principals at Ohio State during 1987-88 produced some very positive reactions on the part of those who participated as candidates. In this section, some of the reflections of one individual who was mentored as part of the program are described. Among the issues covered include the characteristics of what was perceived to be effective mentoring practices in general, and also some of the major benefits that were achieved by a Danforth candidate who participated in the program.

Expectations of a Mentor. The experiences of those who were mentored during the year indicated that the most valued characteristics of program mentors were the following:

1. Availability. (The fact that mentors were accessible to help candidates to cope with difficult situations was quite comforting and reassuring to candidates. People realized that there were colleagues who were willing and able to provide the "straight scoop" concerning problems that were to be experienced in new professional roles).

2. Open Channels of Communication. (Candidates expected a high level of honest and direct feedback from their mentors as a way to provide sound learning experiences. Mentors had to be responsive to candidates' needs, special abilities, concerns, questions, and newly-discovered anxieties concerning the "real world of school administration." A critical skill for mentors had to be the demonstration of positive human relations skills in all contacts with candidates).

3. Administrative Expertise. (Candidates wanted their mentors to be experienced as school administrators, to be sure. However, experience was not viewed as important a quality as was the demonstration of expertise in a rile. Candidates expected that mentors not only know how to do things, but more importantly, how to do things right).

4. Time. (Candidates needed time from their mentors. Often this was not planned, or scheduled time, but rather the opportunity to drop in from time to time to discuss questions and concerns associated with the responsibilities of educational leadership).

5. Ability to Clarify Job Expectations. (Mentors were expected to help candidates overcome some of the "reality shock" that normally accompanies any job change. In this way, progress was made toward helping candidates reduce the sense of conflict and anxiety often felt before getting into a new position).

6. Spiritual Support. (Perhaps above all other characteristics, candidates reported that it was reassuring to be able to find mentors who believed in their abilities so completely that they felt confident that they could do no wrong. Such contacts tended to raise candidates' levels of confidence and competence at the same time. In short, mentors were viewed as particularly helpful when they provided program candidates with the opportunity to determine their own sense of professional direction and approaches to learning).

Although these specific characteristics of effective mentor behaviors were important, there were other ingredients that contributed to positive experiences for Danforth candidates. These centered around the ways in which positive mentor-candidate relationships could be established and maintained over time. Many building blocks go into such arrangements. For example, pairings need to be valued by both the mentor and the person being mentored. The two parties must find the relationship to be equally valuable and important so that it will serve as a way for the mentor and candidate to both feel a sense of support from the other partner. In general, mentoring relationships should display a sense of mutuality that is indicative of caring on the part of the mentor and candidate. No amount of any other specific mentoring ability can overcome a lack of this type of true commitment, and those relationships that did not give evidence of mutually-enhancing pairings were not very successful.

Benefits of Being Mentored. There were five areas in which candidates reported that they felt particular benefits from their ability to work with skilled mentors:

1. Development of Confidence and Competence. (Candidates indicated that they enjoyed receiving a type of special support and guidance from their mentors that helped them to recognize that, despite understandable feelings of anxiety regarding new roles, they truly did enjoy considerable skills and talents that would make them ready to deal with new professional challenges. Candidates indicated that they were able to receive the type of tapping, encouragement, and reinforcement from their mentors that enabled them to look to their future responsibilities with greater confidence).

2. Blending of Theory With Practice. (Danforth candidates had all received considerable academic preparation related to leadership. They knew the theories of how to be effective. The special contributions of mentors were that program candidates were able to hear and see practitioners who were actually putting into daily practice some of the best theories covered in university courses. Often the words changed, but the most important thing was that candidates could see ideas translated into action or a daily basis in real school settings).

3. Improved Communication Skills. (Working on a regular basis with a mentor gave most candidates the ability to fine-tune their abilities to express important ideas to colleagues. In addition, mentors were able to signal candidates when their efforts to communicate with them were not always successful).

4. Learning "Tricks of the Trade". (Candidates were able to pick up a number of proven techniques and strategies that their mentors utilized successfully in different situations. This was a way for candidates to begin to build their own "bag of tricks" to use on the job in the future. Learning the mentors "tricks of the trade" also enabled candidates to learn more about the "real way of doing things in schools." Knowing what to do and following formal system guidelines, policies, or procedures is considerably different from knowing the real story concerning who, what, or how situations encountered on the job should really be handled. Mentors were a significant part of this process).

5. Building a Collegial Network. (One of the most significant benefits of the mentoring dimension of the Danforth Program was that it enabled candidates to recognize that they had colleagues who were willing to work with them and help them

succeed out in the field. An insight that was realized by many of the candidates was that, collectively, any group is smarter than isolated individuals. The mentor-candidate relationship was seen by most program participants as an important beginning to the creation of long-term supportive networks that would likely continue to be maintained for years beyond the term of the principal preparation program).

Nothing can be done to ensure that people who move into careers as school leaders will be absolutely successful in those roles. The Danforth Principals' Preparation Program and activities such as mandated administrator induction programs now being developed in many states are efforts to reduce the likelihood that people experience failures in their first years on the job. There are no guarantees that such attempts will meet their goals. Nevertheless, the availability of mentors to guide and work with aspiring leaders and newcomers to the field has great promise.

Summary

In this paper, we reviewed some of the characteristics of the Danforth Foundation for the Preparation of School Principals at The Ohio State University. Specific attention was focused on the application of mentoring techniques as a central activity in the program. In this way, experienced and successful administrators were brought into meaningful contact with those who served as candidates for future leadership positions in schools.

Two personalized perspectives on the use of mentoring were offered. First, the operation of the mentoring concept in one suburban school district was described. Included were details of the general format for the work that brought administrative mentors and candidates together. In the second part of this paper, the personal

reflections of one Danforth candidate were presented as a way to articulate some of the more meaningful aspects of the overall preparation program. Suggestions were included regarding the specific ways in which mentors might be most helpful to aspiring administrators. The paper concluded with an overview of some of the more important benefits that were derived by candidates who worked closely with mentors throughout the program.